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Late Antebellum Virginia Reconsidered

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*Virginia Historical Society*

Virginia's delegates to the Democratic national convention in 1932, bound by the unit rule, cast their twenty-four votes for favorite son Harry F. Byrd, Sr., on the first ballot. Byrd also received one vote from Indiana. On the fourth ballot, Byrd released the Virginia delegation to vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt. Byrd served six terms in the United States Senate and resigned in 1965.

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# LATE ANTEBELLUM VIRGINIA RECONSIDERED

by DANIEL W. CROFTS\*

LATE antebellum Virginia was a land of paradox. The Old Dominion had the largest total population and the largest slave population of any southern state. Its economic and social characteristics, however, made the commonwealth increasingly distinct from the Deep South. More than has often been recognized, mid-nineteenth-century Virginia's identity and allegiance hung in the balance.

Traditional stereotypes no longer apply. William G. Shade's prize-winning book, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, caps a growing body of modern scholarship that rejects the image of a land populated by "decadent aristocrats" who "favor[ed] heart over head," who were obsessed with "reliving scenes from *Ivanhoe*," and who remained frozen in a late eighteenth-century time warp "as the modern world passed them by." John Tyler was not the representative Virginian of his era. Shade contends instead that this sprawling and diverse state experienced "the same dynamic economic and social development that characterized the country as a whole" and was as good a microcosm of national trends as any other state.<sup>1</sup>

Viewed in this context, Virginia's secession from the Union and key role in the violent convulsion between 1861 and 1865 is almost a cause for wonderment. How did it come about that the state embarked on such a course—and then lobotomized itself so as to pretend that ritual suicide had been proper, logical, inevitable, and heroic? This essay argues that Virginia's political leaders exaggerated the Old Dominion's affinity for Deep South particularism. Even though economic and social trends indicated otherwise, Virginia Democrats liked to pretend that their state was as southern as any. They insisted on writing blank checks for Deep South extremists. When their purported friends presented these checks for payment in 1860 and early 1861, Virginia Democrats found themselves in

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<sup>1</sup> William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824–1861* (Charlottesville and London, 1996), pp. 3–6 (quotations on p. 3).

trouble. Their southern rights charade stalled—but too late to avert disaster.

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The best way to understand late antebellum Virginia is to look at its economic, social, and political components, taking many cues from Shade, from Brent Tarter's magisterial "New Virginia Bookshelf" published in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* in 1996, and from the responses to his essay by Jane Turner Censer, Edward L. Ayers, and James Tice Moore.<sup>2</sup>

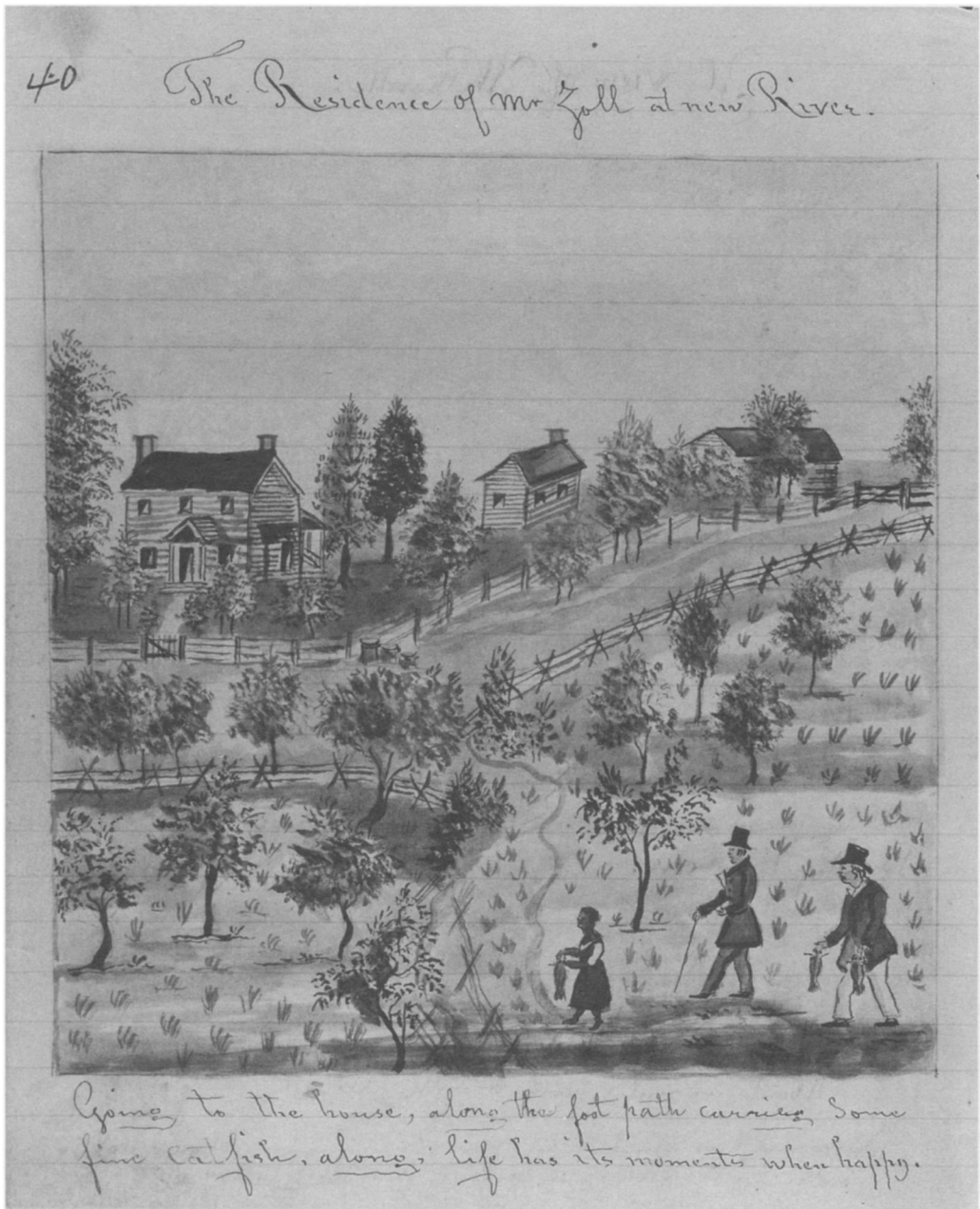
Let us look first at economic trends. One of the most enduring stereotypes of nineteenth-century Virginia is that of agricultural decline—of ruined tobacco fields reverting back into forest as those who once lived and worked there fled (or were sold) to the southwest. The stereotype is misleading, even if based on a kernel of truth. Like all other states on the Atlantic seaboard, Virginia experienced out-migration. The rich soils of the Mississippi valley lured many Virginians away. But Virginia adapted and prospered. In Shade's view, "antebellum Virginia had a balanced and thriving agricultural economy." It enjoyed "agricultural revival rather than decline" and "clearly held its own as the leading agricultural state in the South." It ranked among the leading states in producing the two key staple grains, corn and wheat, it sold quantities of livestock and seafood, it shipped garden crops up the east coast, and it remained by far the top tobacco-growing state in the nation. Rising output and prices made the 1850s a particularly good decade for the Old Dominion's agriculturalists.<sup>3</sup>

Virginia's nonagricultural sector became increasingly formidable in the late antebellum period. Fewer than half the adult white males listed in occupational records for the 1850 census identified themselves as "farmers" or "planters." Nearly one-third of all Virginians lived in counties that included a significant town or city, exposed to urban markets and ideas. A growing segment of the state's labor force worked for wages in pursuits other than agriculture. Among these workers were many recent immigrants from Ireland and Germany. The hiring out of large numbers of Virginia

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<sup>2</sup> Brent Tarter, "The New Virginia Bookshelf," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter cited as *VMHB*) 104 (1996): 7–102, esp. pp. 36–73; Jane Turner Censer, "The Nineteenth-Century Bookshelf," *ibid.*, pp. 121–28; Edward L. Ayers, "Virginia History as Southern History: The Nineteenth Century," *ibid.*, pp. 129–36; James Tice Moore, "From Dynasty to Disfranchisement: Some Reflections about Virginia History, 1820–1902," *ibid.*, pp. 137–48.

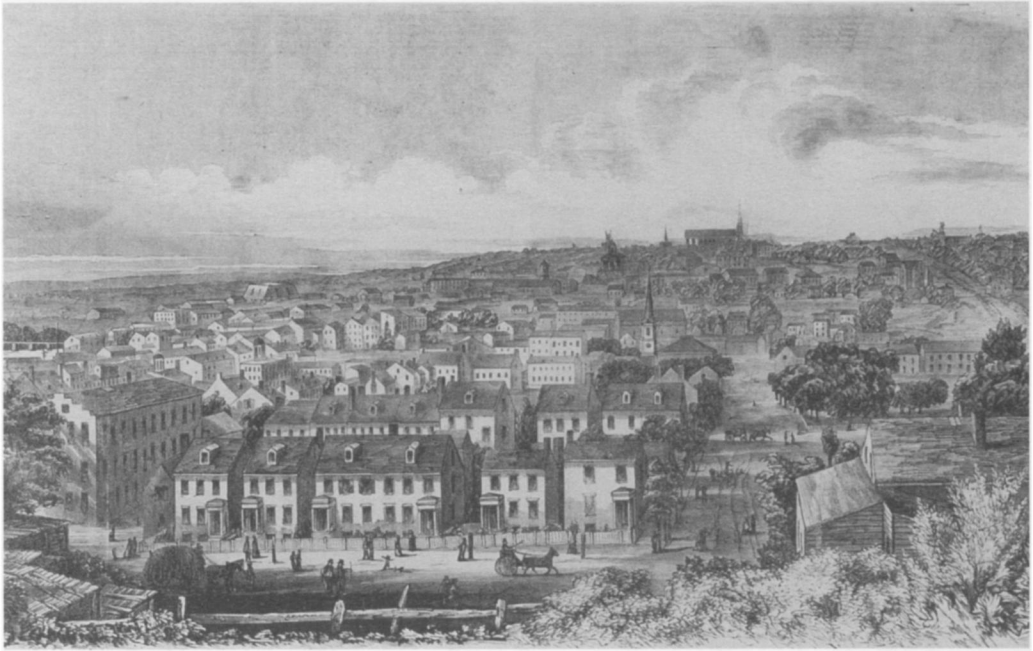
<sup>3</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 33 (quotations), 43; Emmett B. Fields, "The Agricultural Population of Virginia, 1850–1860" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1953), pp. 55, 68–75; David R. Goldfield, *Urban Growth in the Age of Sectionalism: Virginia, 1847–1861* (Baton Rouge and London, 1977), pp. 238–39, 246.



Lewis Miller, drawing book, 1856–71, Virginia Historical Society

Despite the out-migration of nearly a million people during the antebellum period and the exhaustion of some tobacco lands in the eastern counties, Virginia remained, in the words of William G. Shade, “the most agriculturally diverse state in the country.” Here Pennsylvania folk artist Lewis Miller records the fertile soil and fine fishing along the New River.





Frank Leslie's Illustrated News, 16 July 1853, *Virginia Historical Society*

On the eve of the Civil War, Virginia's capital boasted "the greatest industrial diversity of any city in the South." Richmond's seventy-seven iron-manufacturing businesses helped place Virginia third in the country in value of iron goods produced.

slaves offered employers greater flexibility in meeting labor demands.<sup>4</sup> Industrial activity in the late antebellum period, benefiting from the rapid extension of railroad lines, was "tremendously robust."<sup>5</sup> Output of iron, coal, and salt soared, especially in the northwestern part of the state. Wheeling, taking advantage of excellent transportation access to northern markets, produced railroad iron, nails, and glass. Richmond, which enjoyed "the greatest industrial diversity of any city in the South," was nationally prominent for its iron manufacturing, flour mills, and tobacco products.<sup>6</sup>

Dubious northerners such as Frederick Law Olmsted could still point to decay and decrepitude. Olmsted found life in rural Virginia "isolated, lonely, and dissociable." He blamed slavery for a "low state of society," in

<sup>4</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 34–35, 122. On slave labor in Virginia's late antebellum industries, see Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York and London, 1994), pp. 38–41, 67–70, 99–101; and Lynda J. Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt, 1850–1870* (Athens, Ga., and London, 1992), pp. 18, 27–31, 57–76. On the growth of free black businesses in the 1850s, notwithstanding severe legal and societal obstacles, see Loren Schweninger, "The Roots of Enterprise: Black-Owned Businesses in Virginia, 1830–1880," *VMHB* 100 (1992): 518–22.

<sup>5</sup> Tarter, "The New Virginia Bookshelf," pp. 39–42 (quotation on p. 42).

<sup>6</sup> Goldfield, *Urban Growth in the Age of Sectionalism*, pp. 182–96 (quotation on p. 193); John E. Stealey III, *The Antebellum Kanawha Salt Business and Western Markets* (Lexington, Ky., 1993).

which nothing that could be “postponed or overlooked, without immediate serious inconvenience, gets attended to.”<sup>7</sup> The resolute traditionalist Daniel W. Cobb of Southampton preferred the “oald slow way[s].”<sup>8</sup> But many Virginians had a different outlook than Cobb or the folks Olmsted encountered. In all kinds of ways, Virginia was changing.

A “prolonged upsurge in the Old Dominion’s agricultural and industrial fortunes” was especially evident in the late 1840s and 1850s, James Tice Moore notes. Manufacturing output leaped in a single decade from \$30 million annually to \$50 million. Transporting and processing Virginia’s leading agricultural products, tobacco and wheat, stimulated the state’s industrial sector. Virginians engaged in a “frenzy of building canals and railroads and founding banks.” State government played an increasingly active role in incorporating, promoting, and financing these commerce-enhancing undertakings. Some traditionalists found these new departures alarming and disruptive, but the principal obstacle to a shared sense of accomplishment came from the opposite direction. Northwestern Virginia felt that it had not participated in the barbecue, and its complaints about neglect and discrimination became increasingly shrill.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, these trends did not necessarily promise long-term prosperity. A hybrid industrial labor force of free and slave labor encompassed many anomalies. Native whites demanded skilled jobs and higher wages to set themselves apart from immigrants and slave laborers.<sup>10</sup> They resisted industrial discipline and aspired to economic independence.<sup>11</sup> In the long run, too, slavery retarded innovation.<sup>12</sup> Southerners ultimately had no

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom* . . . , Modern Library Edition (New York, 1984), pp. 67 (first quotation), 86 (third quotation); Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country*, Sourcebooks in Negro History (New York, 1970), pp. 288–90 (second quotation on p. 289).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel W. Crofts, ed., *Cobb’s Ordeal: The Diaries of a Virginia Farmer, 1842–1872* (Athens, Ga., and London, 1997), p. 54.


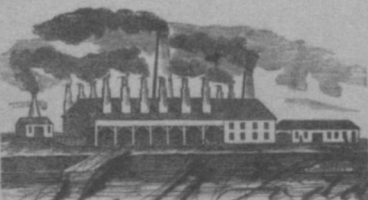

<sup>9</sup> Moore, “From Dynasty to Disfranchisement,” p. 139 (first quotation); Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, p. 285; Tarter, “The New Virginia Bookshelf,” pp. 39–44 (second quotation on p. 39); Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia’s Tobacco Belt*, pp. 28–30; Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis*, The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill and London, 1989), pp. 159–63. For illuminating (and contrasting) assessments of popular responses to the rise of the marketplace in the late antebellum South, see Harry L. Watson, “Conflict and Collaboration: Yeomen, Slaveholders, and Politics in the Antebellum South,” *Social History* 10 (1985): 273–98; and Paul D. Escott, “Yeoman Independence and the Market: Social Status and Economic Development in Antebellum North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 66 (1989): 275–300.

<sup>10</sup> Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman, “Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the Antebellum American South,” *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 1175–1200; Michael D. Naragon, “Ballots, Bullets, and Blood: The Transformation of Richmond, Virginia, 1850–1874” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1996), pp. 43–67.

<sup>11</sup> Merritt Roe Smith, *Harpers Ferry Armory and the New Technology: The Challenge of Change* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1977); Paul A. Shackel, *Culture Change and the New Technology: An Archaeology of the Early American Industrial Era*, Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology (New York and London, 1996), pp. 59–85, 147–62, 167–71; Dew, *Bond of Iron*, pp. 67, 99–100.

<sup>12</sup> For a marvelous case study, see Dew, *Bond of Iron*, pp. 332–33.

**MISSOURI IRON WORKS.**

**SWEENEY, JOHNSTON & CO.,**  
*Warehouses 66 and 68 Main Street,*  
**WHEELING, VIRGINIA.**

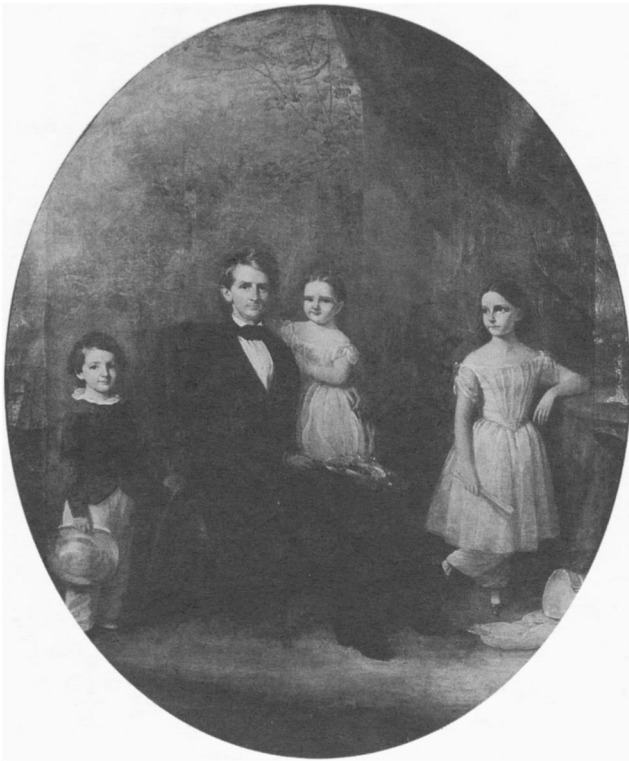
PRICES.		PRICES.	
	Per Ton		Per Ton
TIRE IRON, 1 1/2, 1 3/4, 1 1/2, 2, 2 1/2	by 1 to 1 in. per lb.	HALF OVAL, 1 inch,	3 1/2
" 2 1/2, 3, 3 1/2, 4 & 4 1/2	"	" 1 1/2 inch,	4 1/2
" 5, 5 1/2, and 6 by 1 to 1 inch,	8 1/4	" 2 inch,	5 1/2
BUGGY TIRE, 1 1/2, 1 3/4, 1 1/2 and 2 inch by 1/2 inch,	3 1/4	" 3 inch,	6 1/2
" 1 1/2 and 1 3/4 by 1/2 and 1 inch,	3 1/2	" 4 inch,	7 1/2
HORSE SHOE, 1 and 1 1/2 by 5-16, 1/2, 1/2 and 1 inch,	3 1/2	" 5 inch,	8 1/2
" 1/2 by 1/2, 1/2 and 1 inch,	3 1/2	HOOP IRON, 2 1/2, 3, 3 1/2, 3 1/2 and 4 inches wide,	3 1/4
" 1/2 by 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 1 1/2 and 2 1/2 inches wide,	3 1/2
BAND IRON, 1 1/2, 1 3/4, 1 1/2 and 2 by 1/2 and 3-16,	3 1/2	" 1 1/2 and 1 3/4 " "	4
" 2 1/2, 2 1/2 and 2 1/2 by 1/2 and 3-16 inch,	3 1/4	" 1 inch wide, COOPERS' HOOPS,	4 1/2
" 3, 3 1/2, 3 1/2, 4, 4 1/2 and 4 1/2 by 1/2 and 3-16,	3 1/4	" 1/2 inch wide, " "	4 1/2
" 5, 5 1/2 and 6 by 1/2 and 1 inch,	3 1/2	" 1/2 inch wide, " "	4 1/2
SADDLE TREE, 1 1/2 by 1/2, 3-16 and 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 1/2 inch wide, " "	4
" 1/2 by 1/2, 3-16 and 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	SHEET IRON, Nos 13, 14 and 15, wire gage,	4
" 1/2 by 1/2, 3-16 and 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 16 and 17, " "	4 1/2
" 1/2 by 1/2, 3-16 and 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 18, 19 and 20, " "	4 1/2
ROUND & SQUARE, 1, 1 1/2, 1 1/2 and 1 1/2 inch,	3 1/4	" 22, 23, and 24, " "	4 1/2
" 1 1/2, 1 1/2 and 1 1/2 inch,	3 1/4	" 25 and 26, " "	4 1/2
" 2, 2 1/2 and 2 1/2 inch,	3 1/4	BOILER IRON, 1/2 and 3-16 inch,	2 1/2
" 2 1/2, 2 1/2 and 2 1/2 inch,	3 1/4	" 1/2 inch,	2 1/2
" 3, 3 1/2 and 3 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	PLOUGH SLABS,	7 1/2
" 3 1/2 and 4 inch,	3 1/2	WINGS,	7 1/2
" 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	CUT NAILS, 10d, 12d-16d and 20d,	3 1/2
" 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 8d and 9d,	3 1/2
" 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 6d and 7d,	3 1/2
" 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 5d,	3 1/2
" 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 4d,	3 1/2
" 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 3d,	3 1/2
" 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	" 2d,	3 1/2
NAIL RODS,	6 1/4	CUT SPIKES, 3, 3 1/2, 4 and 4 1/2 inch,	3 1/2
OVAL,	3 1/4	" 5, 5 1/2 and 6 inch,	3 1/2
" 1 inch,	3 1/2	" 6 1/2 and 7 inch,	3 1/2
" 1 1/2 inch,	3 1/2	PAT. WROUGHT SPIKES, 1 inch thick, any length,	6
" 2 inch,	3 1/2	" 5-16, " "	5 1/2
" 3 inch,	4	" 1/2 and 7-16 " "	5 1/2
" 4 inch,	4 1/2	" 1/2 inch, " "	4 1/2

Wheeling, April 26 1859 4/11 of Cash

Virginia Historical Society

Wheeling's prime location down the Ohio from Pittsburgh spurred the development of iron manufacturing. The western city's six nail factories turned out more nails than any other location in the United States. By 1855, the Missouri Iron Works produced some 3,000 tons of nails and other iron goods each year. The panic of 1857 hit many Wheeling factories hard, and the Missouri works came under new management, as is evident from the handwritten correction on this 1859 price list.





Increasingly during the antebellum period, many couples sought companionate marriages. Robert Henry Maury (1816–1886), a banker and broker who served as president of Richmond’s stock exchange in the 1870s, posed for a dynastic portrait about 1856 with Richard Wortham, Sarah Ann, and Isabel, his three children from his first marriage.

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argument to counter northern critics, who insisted that educated labor was better suited for an economic order based on machinery and invention. Nor could southerners answer northern complaints that slave labor soaked up a “vast sinking of capital,” which in a free labor system would be invested in “lands, buildings, and machinery, or ships.”<sup>13</sup> From the perspective of late antebellum Virginians, however, slavery had proved adaptable. The state’s agricultural economy had diversified. Industrial growth in the 1840s and 1850s depended heavily on slave labor, made more available by the expansion of slave hiring.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Henry Sumner White, letter to the editor of *Zion’s Herald*, 14 Nov. 1864, in Edward D. Jervay, “Prison Life among the Rebels: Recollections of a Union Chaplain,” *Civil War History* (hereafter cited as *CWH*) 34 (1988): 30–31.

<sup>14</sup> Peter J. Albert, “The Protean Institution: The Geography, Economy, and Ideology of Slavery in Post-Revolutionary Virginia” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 1976). Richard C. Wade’s well-known argument that slavery was incompatible with city life has proved very influential; see Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (New York, 1964); and Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1985), pp. 55–57. Berlin and Gutman’s essay, “Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves,” emphasizes the increasing use of white immigrant labor. A recent study of late antebellum Richmond challenges Wade and Fields, however, and shows convincingly how slavery could be adapted to urban circumstances. See Naragon, “The Transformation of Richmond,” p. 558 n. 2.

War or no war and with or without slavery, Virginia and the entire South were fated to encounter harsh economic challenges. After the war, worldwide overproduction of cotton blighted the economy of the New South. The explosive growth of wheat cultivation on the trans-Mississippi prairies constricted the market for Virginia wheat even before a worldwide wheat glut took shape. Virginia iron was supplanted by mass-produced Pennsylvania iron as soon as railroad links were reopened after the end of the Civil War. Of those products that chiefly sustained Virginia's prewar boom, only tobacco, stimulated by cigarette manufacturing after 1880, continued on an upward trajectory.<sup>15</sup> All of these negative economic outcomes, however, were far from visible amid the burgeoning commercial and industrial surge of the Old Dominion in the 1850s.

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Let us turn from economic to social developments. What any analyst immediately confronts is sprawling diversity. This very diversity distinguished Virginia from the Deep South. Virginia's social order varied greatly by region. In many respects two separate states had emerged, even before the war. East of the Blue Ridge, especially in the southern Piedmont, Virginia had concentrations of slaves as large as those in plantation regions of the Deep South. West of the Blue Ridge, however, only 15 percent of the population was enslaved, less than in any state that seceded in 1861. Northwestern Virginia beyond the Alleghenies was 95 percent white, comparable to adjacent free states. The northwest was the fastest-growing part of the state. Therefore, proportionately fewer white families in the Old Dominion owned slaves as the nineteenth century progressed, and Virginia faced internal tensions comparable to those that strained the national Union.<sup>16</sup>

Slave society in Virginia had much in common with the Deep South. These commonalities ultimately aligned most of Virginia with the Confederate States of America. But white Virginians also pointed to differences and often asserted that slaves were better treated in the Old Dominion.<sup>17</sup> Was there any basis for the assertion? This question may be impossible to answer. Even if it could be shown that Virginia slaves suffered less physical violence, how does one assess the leverage enjoyed by Virginia slaveholders, who made it plain that recalcitrant slaves would be sold farther south?

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<sup>15</sup> Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1978); Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York, 1986); Dew, *Bond of Iron*, pp. 354, 360. Even though trends in world markets stunted southern growth, southern laborers for the most part remained tied to their home region, unable or unwilling to seek opportunity elsewhere.

<sup>16</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 3–4, 19–22.

<sup>17</sup> Tarter, "The New Virginia Bookshelf," p. 54.

# **32 NEGROES FOR SALE.**

**By virtue of a decree of the Circuit Court of Pittsylvania County, I shall, on MONDAY, the 28th instant, (it being Court day,) at Halifax Courthouse, sell to the highest bidder,**

## **14 Negroes,**

The property of Julia C. Daniel, dec'd., consisting of young men, women and children—one boy and one girl—all likely, one half of the purchase money due at six months, and the balance due in twelve months. Sold for a division.

**JOHN D. HUNT, Commissioner.**

**Also, at the same time and place, I shall sell EIGHTEEN OTHER NEGROES, say three men, one woman with four children; one woman with one child; four young women; three boys and one girl.**

The above Negroes are truly valuable and desirable, and sold for no fault. My object being to raise money, I have selected the likeliest of my number, and I can conscientiously recommend them. One of them is a good plain Cook.

## **T E R M S .**

One half payable in six months, and the balance in twelve months, bearing interest from the expiration of the first 6 months.

**JOHN D. HUNT.**

**NOVEMBER 8, 1853.**

JOHNSON & WOOLFOLK, Printers, Lynchburg.

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By 1850, approximately 55,000 Virginians held slaves, although only one-tenth of that number owned more than twenty. One-third of the Old Dominion's population was in bondage; another 3.8 percent were free blacks.

In the recollections of Virginia slaves one can find evidence pointing in various directions. Brenda E. Stevenson uses such recollections to construct a damning account of the way that slaveholders in Loudoun County willingly sundered slave families.<sup>18</sup> Southampton County contained the full spectrum of slaveholders—mean-spirited types who kept their whips close at hand, conflicted ones who felt guilty about sending slaves to the southwest, those who heeded complaints from their laborers and tried to find humane overseers, and a few whom the average modern American might cheerfully trade for his or her current boss.<sup>19</sup> Virginia's slaveholders included a complement of would-be do-gooders such as John Hartwell Cocke and the Heaton family of Loudoun County, who sent slaves to Liberia, where, alas, most sickened and died.<sup>20</sup>

Some whites in antebellum Virginia appear to have tolerated violations of the taboo forbidding sexual relations between black men and white women.<sup>21</sup> Occasionally Virginia slaves overcame all the obstacles and became respected citizens. Robert Wright, born a slave, inherited his white father's substantial property in Campbell County. Irrefutable evidence shows that he enjoyed "stature in the local community" and moved "freely and openly in white society." For Wright and at least for some others, class transcended race.<sup>22</sup>

Virginia's more complex economy created opportunities for some slaves to gain greater control over their lives than would typically have been possible in the cotton South. The most eloquent and deeply researched study of slavery in Virginia, Charles B. Dew's *Bond of Iron*, describes the system of skilled slave labor devised by iron manufacturer William Weaver of Rockbridge County. Weaver and his heir, Daniel C. E. Brady, relied on incentives rather than overt coercion. They paid cash for "overwork" at Buffalo Forge, thus allowing slaves to acquire some accoutrements of middle-class life. Dew shows that this arrangement resulted from the greater bargaining power of skilled slaves, without whom the iron furnace

<sup>18</sup> Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, 1976); Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York and Oxford, 1996), pp. 159–327.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834–1869* (Charlottesville and London, 1992), pp. 20–38.

<sup>20</sup> Randall M. Miller, ed., *"Dear Master": Letters of a Slave Family* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1978); Marie Tyler-McGraw, ed., "'The Prize I Mean Is the Prize of Liberty': A Loudoun County Family in Liberia," *VMHB* 97 (1989): 355–74.

<sup>21</sup> Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven and London, 1997); Diane Miller Sommerville, "The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered," *Journal of Southern History* (hereafter cited as *JSH*) 61 (1995): 481–518. Concerned particularly to contrast harsher, more hysterical white southern attitudes after emancipation with a more relaxed prewar outlook, both Hodes and Sommerville draw on evidence from antebellum Virginia (Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, pp. 68–95; Sommerville, "Rape Myth," pp. 481–85).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., "Unfixing Race: Class, Power, and Identity in an Interracial Family," *VMHB* 102 (1994): 349–80 (quotations on pp. 377, 379).



could not have run. Sometimes in hot summer weather Weaver's skilled ironworkers simply refused to work. The small close-knit slave community at Buffalo Forge developed strong family ties, which Weaver attempted to protect.<sup>23</sup>

Dew's work brings into sharp focus practices already hinted at in earlier studies of iron manufacturing and industrial slavery in the Chesapeake region.<sup>24</sup> Somewhat comparable opportunities existed in urban areas, especially for slaves able to make their own hiring arrangements. Many who worked in Richmond tobacco factories had the right to earn extra wages and to select their own living places.<sup>25</sup>

By mid-century, class divisions among whites were increasing throughout the United States. Wage labor and immigration in the North combined to knock rungs out of the ladder of upward mobility. The free labor society idealized by Republican party orators no longer depicted accurately large segments of northern social reality. At the same time, the so-called *Herrenvolk* democracy of the slave South, as celebrated by proslavery orators, was equally fanciful. It flew in the face of southern social reality to say, as they did, that all white men were equally respected and enjoyed equal opportunity. Northern and southern publicists preferred to criticize the opposite section's shortcomings rather than admit to any flaws in their own. At the same time, however, elites in both sections worried about the loyalties of ordinary whites.<sup>26</sup>

Virginia, sharing attributes of both North and South, exhibited hybrid class tensions. The pious Methodist Daniel Cobb considered himself one of the plain folk and resented the slights of the planters. So did John Walker of King and Queen County, also a Methodist with even larger property holdings than Cobb. Many less accomplished whites must have felt equally or more estranged.<sup>27</sup> Southern rights posturing gave political and economic elites a means of blunting such tensions, by maintaining that their stance championed the interests of all whites. Urban and industrial elites in Virginia used somewhat different tactics to dampen the class resentments of recently enfranchised white workingmen. The expansion of city services

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<sup>23</sup> Dew, *Bond of Iron*, pp. 7–8, 107–20, 180–81, 260–62, 278, 316, 325, 366–67.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald L. Lewis, *Coal, Iron, and Slaves: Industrial Slavery in Maryland and Virginia, 1715–1865*, Contributions in Labor History, 6 (Westport, Conn., and London, 1979); Kathleen Bruce, *Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era* (New York and London, 1930).

<sup>25</sup> John T. O'Brien, "Factory, Church, and Community: Blacks in Antebellum Richmond," *JSH* 44 (1978): 509–36; Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt*, pp. 57–76.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York and Oxford, 1980); William L. Barney, *The Passage of the Republic: An Interdisciplinary History of Nineteenth-Century America* (Lexington, Mass., 1987); J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown, Conn., 1985); John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Crofts, ed., *Cobb's Ordeal*, pp. xvi–xvii, 26–27, 43, 47–49; Claudia Bushman, "Farmer John Walker of Virginia" (unpublished manuscript, 1999), pp. 203, 331.

under a facade of nonpartisanship enabled wealthy residents of Richmond to quarantine any potential challenge from a turbulent white proletariat.<sup>28</sup> Railroad builders in southwest Virginia purported to widen opportunity for ordinary folk, but the actual consequences of their work, according to Kenneth W. Noe, were to widen the gap between haves and have-nots.<sup>29</sup>

New scholarship makes it possible to devise additional means of comparing Virginia with the Deep South. Enough work has now been done on gender relations and reform movements, and enough individual diaries have been published, to say that the influential models regarding southern white masculinity advanced by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Catherine Clinton, Steven M. Stowe, and Kenneth S. Greenberg do not apply that well to antebellum Virginia.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever may have been the situation in the Deep South, most white male Virginians sought intimacy with their spouses and emotional fulfillment from marriage. They appear to have made greater psychological investment in their marriages than in their relationships with other men. To be sure, Virginia husbands expected their wives to cater to their needs and play dependent, self-sacrificing roles. They patronized their often-younger spouses and assumed their inability to function outside the female sphere. In so doing they hardly demonstrated distinctly southern characteristics: much the same could be said of husbands in antebellum Pennsylvania or Ohio. Brenda Stevenson catalogs the many potential obstacles to a satisfying marriage but concludes that emotionally committed relationships were widespread.<sup>31</sup> Melinda S. Buza likewise found more companionate marriages in Virginia than those in which "rigid, uncompromising, honorific" patriarchs and their "frustrated, overburdened" wives led "hostile,

<sup>28</sup> Naragon, "The Transformation of Richmond."

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana and Chicago, 1994), pp. 48–52.

<sup>30</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York and Oxford, 1982); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York, 1982); Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, 1987); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore and London, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, pp. 38–40, 63–94. Stevenson could have found much corroborating evidence in the correspondence of John and Alcinda Janney, now in the Janney Family Papers (#8409-a) at the University of Virginia Library. See Anne Sarah Rubin, "Between Union and Chaos: The Political Life of John Janney," *VMHB* 102 (1994): 386, 413. The companionate Virginia marriages dissected by Stevenson appear comparable to those in North Carolina studied by Jane Turner Censer and Paul D. Escott. See Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge, 1984); and Paul D. Escott, ed., *North Carolina Yeoman: The Diary of Basil Armstrong Thomasson, 1853–1862* (Athens, Ga., and London, 1996).



Richmonder Martha Beaston (Tyler) Floyd (1838–1887) typified the growing literacy and education among southern women by keeping a commonplace book of notes from books she read in 1860.

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estranged lives.”<sup>32</sup> Daniel Cobb of Southampton craved both intimacy and paternal dominance in his marriage—but got neither.<sup>33</sup>

White women in antebellum Virginia, even if in many ways constrained, were hardly mere putty in the hands of their husbands. A variety of studies point to more independent-minded, self-conscious, assertive, and even “protofeminist” tendencies in Virginia than in the Lower South.<sup>34</sup> Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., has illuminated the life of Evelina Gregory Roane, a

<sup>32</sup> Melinda S. Buza, “‘Pledges of Our Love’: Friendship, Love, and Marriage among the Virginia Gentry, 1800–1825,” in Edward L. Ayers and John C. Willis, eds., *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (Charlottesville and London, 1991), pp. 9–36 (quotations on pp. 9–10, 29).

<sup>33</sup> Crofts, ed., *Cobb’s Ordeal*, pp. xvii–xviii, 22–29.

<sup>34</sup> Censer, “The Nineteenth-Century Bookshelf,” pp. 126–28 (quotation on p. 126). For a revisionist assessment of antebellum reform in the Lower South, see John W. Quist, *Restless Visionaries: The Social Roots of Antebellum Reform in Alabama and Michigan* (Baton Rouge, 1998); and John W. Quist, “Slaveholding Operatives of the Benevolent Empire: Bible, Tract, and Sunday School Societies in Antebellum Tuscaloosa County, Alabama,” *JSH* 62 (1996): 481–526. Quist finds more evidence of female involvement than might be expected on the basis of previous historiography; nonetheless, Alabama reform appears to have been male-dominated (*ibid.*, pp. 521–23). Douglas W. Carlson, “‘Drinks He to His Own Undoing’: Temperance Ideology in the Deep South,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (1998): 659–91, contends that scholars such as Eugene Genovese, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Kenneth Greenberg, and Steven Stowe have exaggerated North-South dichotomies. Carlson suggests, instead, a “continuum.” Women’s names appear on the rosters of

strong-willed woman who refused to be cowed by an abusive husband and successfully challenged patriarchal prerogative.<sup>35</sup> Martha Hancock Wheat tapped the "spiritual energy of evangelical religion" to gain "a sense of individual power and autonomy." Her "beliefs and behavior," Cynthia A. Kierner suggests, paralleled those of "reform-minded northern women."<sup>36</sup> Evangelicalism also enabled Elizabeth and William Wirt to build a companionate and "surprisingly egalitarian marriage."<sup>37</sup>

Some Virginia women moved even more directly into the public sphere. Suzanne Lebsock discovered that women in Petersburg organized two female orphanages and attempted in other ways to aid the poor.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the state, women participated in the temperance movement. Some female supporters of African colonization, most notably Mary Minor Blackford, maintained a muted antislavery stance even as the male-dominated Virginia Colonization Society sought only to rid the state of free blacks. Public involvement, as Elizabeth R. Varon has shown, led some women into the very masculine world of partisan politics and into pro-Union commemorations of George Washington.<sup>39</sup> Lucy Breckinridge's doubts about marriage and her professed determination to lead an independent life were written by a seemingly conventional young woman. In part the product of wartime dislocation and uncertainty, her audacious diary musings must also reflect ideas shared by other women in late antebellum Virginia.<sup>40</sup>

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Deep South temperance societies, but Carlson finds little evidence of female leadership or initiative (ibid., pp. 674–76, 678, 682–83).

<sup>35</sup> Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., ed., "'Placed in the Power of Violence': The Divorce Petition of Evelina Gregory Roane, 1824," *VMHB* 100 (1992): 29–78. See also Joshua D. Rothman, "'To Be Freed from Thate Curs and Let at Liberty': Interracial Adultery and Divorce in Antebellum Virginia," ibid. 106 (1998): 443–81.

<sup>36</sup> Cynthia A. Kierner, "Woman's Piety within Patriarchy: The Religious Life of Martha Hancock Wheat of Bedford County," ibid. 100 (1992): 79–98 (quotations on pp. 81, 81 n. 7).

<sup>37</sup> Anya Jabour, "'No Fetters But Such as Love Shall Forge': Elizabeth and William Wirt and Marriage in the Early Republic," ibid. 104 (1996): 221–22, 250 (quotation); Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal*, Gender Relations in the American Experience (Baltimore and London, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York and London, 1984), pp. 195–228.

<sup>39</sup> L. Minor Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Story of a Virginia Lady, Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford, 1802–1896, Who taught her sons to hate Slavery and to love the Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954); Patricia Hickin, "Antislavery in Virginia, 1831–1861" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1968); Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women & Politics in Antebellum Virginia*, Gender and American Culture Series (Chapel Hill and London, 1998), pp. 30–39, 41–70, 71–102, 103–36. See also Elizabeth R. Varon, "'The Ladies Are Whigs': Lucy Barbour, Henry Clay, and Nineteenth-Century Virginia Politics," *Virginia Cavalcade* 42 (1992–93): 72–83; and Elizabeth R. Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History* 82 (1995–96): 494–521.

<sup>40</sup> Mary D. Robertson, ed., *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862–1864* (2d ed.; Columbia, S.C., 1994), pp. 9–30, 94, 131–32, 175, 188; Anya Jabour, "Albums of Affection: Female Friendship and Coming of Age in Antebellum Virginia," *VMHB* 107 (1999): 150–56.



Looking only at economic and social developments, one is strongly inclined to answer affirmatively the key query posed by Tarter, Censer, and Ayers—whether antebellum Virginia shared more “with Maryland and Kentucky than with states farther south.”<sup>41</sup> Maryland, transformed by the huge metropolis of Baltimore and no longer much committed to plantation society, was a case unto itself. Louisville likewise had probably done more to subvert the Old South’s status quo in Kentucky than Richmond had done for Virginia. But enough had changed in Virginia by the 1850s that no one would have mistaken it for South Carolina or Mississippi. If the sectional crisis pitted an unchanging South against a fast-changing non-South, Virginia stood precariously in between, on the edge.<sup>42</sup>

The sectional crosspressures confronting late antebellum Virginia both shaped and were shaped by the arena of electoral politics. A diverse state spawned two quite dissimilar party groupings—an intensely prosouthern Democratic party, and sectionally moderate Whig and Whig successor parties. Given the Old Dominion’s economic and social conditions, one might expect the state to have followed a politically moderate course, as tended to occur in Maryland and Kentucky. Virginia did not move toward the middle ground, however, at least not until matters had gotten hopelessly out of hand. The remainder of this essay will attempt to explain the disjuncture between a modernizing economic and social order and a seemingly anomalous preference for dogmatically southern political leadership.

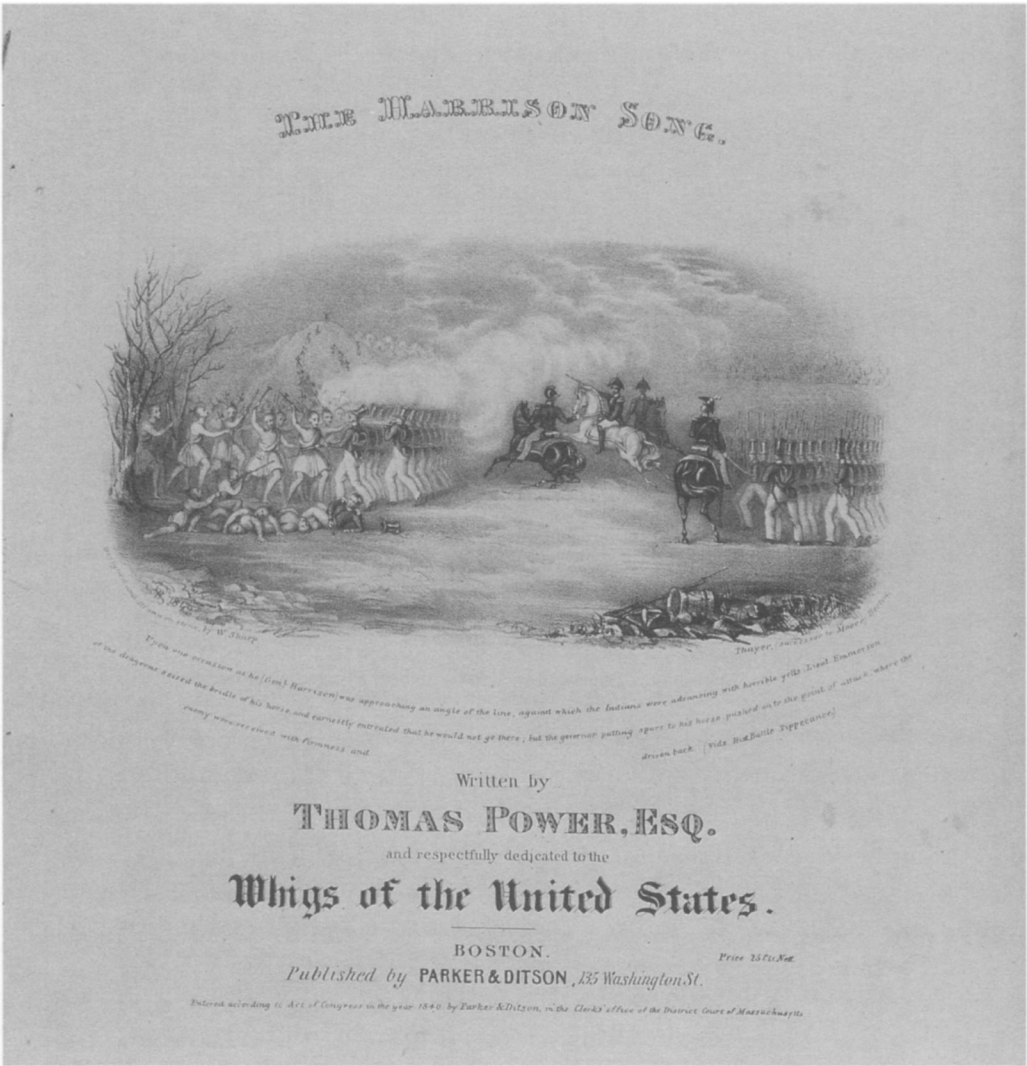
Shade’s book synthesizes modern scholarship on antebellum Virginia politics. Functioning as bookends for his inquiry are the two state constitutional conventions of 1829–30 and 1850–51. Only at the latter did Virginia adopt democratic electoral procedures comparable to the rest of the country, including universal white male suffrage and filling all significant offices by popular voting. But even before Virginians broadened their electorate, modern political parties coalesced, built loyal constituencies, and participated centrally in the governing process.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Tarter, “The New Virginia Bookshelf,” p. 53 (quotation); Censer, “The Nineteenth-Century Bookshelf,” p. 128; Ayers, “Virginia History as Southern History,” p. 129.

<sup>42</sup> James M. McPherson, “Antebellum Southern Exceptionalism: A New Look at an Old Question,” *CWH* 29 (1983): 230–44; Ayers and Willis, eds., *Edge of the South*.

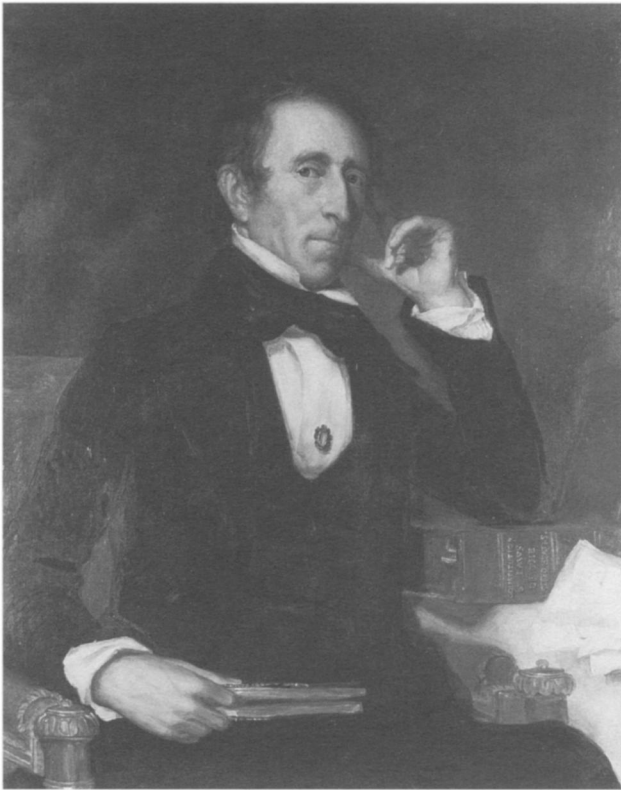
<sup>43</sup> Shade notes that Virginia challenges the conventional understanding of how mass political parties emerged in the United States. More democratic ground rules are often considered a prerequisite for modern popular parties. “In the Old Dominion, however, constitutional changes in the rules of the game lagged behind party development” (Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 76–77).



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Hard times resulting from the panic of 1837 drove many citizens to rally around the Whig banner in 1840. “We have had many recruits in our ranks from the pressure of the times,” noted William Henry Harrison, who carried the presidential election with 234 electoral votes to incumbent Martin Van Buren’s 60.

Shade focuses on the rise of Virginia’s two competing antebellum parties, the Jacksonian Democrats and the anti-Jacksonian Whigs. Between 1833 and 1840, Virginia experienced a partisan transformation broadly comparable to that occurring in other parts of the Union. Andrew Jackson’s high-handed manner, coupled with his perceived hostility to banks and transportation improvements, eroded his political base. Matters became worse for his handpicked successor, Martin Van Buren, who had the misfortune to preside over a sharp national economic downturn. Those



John Tyler was a throwback to a Pre-partisan era of American politics. As president, Tyler, a states' rights Whig, was read out of his party.

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wanting government to do more to promote economic development tended to become Whigs. The anti-Jackson coalition in Virginia originally included an exotic and basically uncharacteristic element—states' rights ideologues who faulted Jackson for treating South Carolina nullifiers disrespectfully in 1832–33. Starting in the late 1830s, however, most states' rights Whigs gravitated back to the Jackson coalition. There they proved better able to promote their agenda.

Virginia witnessed a surge of popular political involvement between 1835 and 1840. Increased voter interest and turnout coincided with the sharpening of party lines and the introduction of partisanship into local contests. Growing numbers of voters acquired a firm partisan identity. These tendencies culminated with the presidential campaign of 1840. Record numbers of voters turned out to support Van Buren's reelection or the challenge of his Whig rival, Virginia-born William Henry Harrison. Harrison's ticket included a states' rights Virginian, John Tyler, but the ill-matched pair could not quite break the Old Dominion's Democratic loyalties. Van Buren lost the presidency while narrowly carrying Virginia. At least 80 percent of eligible Virginia voters trooped to the polls, and the

partisan allegiances demonstrated there persisted for the next two decades.<sup>44</sup>

Virginia's Whig party was almost completely shorn of its states' rights wing during Tyler's presidency. Henry A. Wise and Abel Parker Upshur led the "corporal's guard" of like-minded easterners out of the Whig coalition toward eventual alliance with the Democracy. In the state as in the nation, Whigs became the party of "economic development and moral uplift." They favored industry, banks, railroads and canals, public schools, and temperance. In Shade's analysis, "Middle-class moral reform upheld by the authority of the state appealed much more readily to the bourgeois Whigs than to agrarian Democrats."<sup>45</sup>

Democrats, by contrast, disdained "government activity in general and taxes in particular." The party was a coalition of those who preferred the status quo—including traditionalistic planters and voters in less-developed areas who were poorly connected to the market. Ethnoreligious loyalties had large partisan consequences: almost all voters of German ancestry were Democrats. As a consequence, several counties in the Shenandoah Valley dominated by the culturally conservative descendants of eighteenth-century German migrants returned the highest Democratic margins in the state. Democratic libertarianism, opposing constraints on individual behavior and Whig programs of moral uplift, also appealed to recent German and Irish migrants, who were predominantly Roman Catholic.<sup>46</sup>

The two most troublesome issues confronting antebellum Virginia—the growth of the free-labor northwest and the future of slavery—caused headaches for party managers. Because both parties evolved as coalitions with support in both east and west, the interconnected hot potatoes of regional advantage and slavery created both opportunity and peril. Democrats, ideologically more inclined to side with eastern slaveholding traditionalists, needed to maintain the loyalty of German farmers in the Valley and Jacksonian yeomen throughout the state. Whigs, ideologically more disposed to find common ground with reformers, ran the risk of losing support in the east.

Increasingly during the 1840s and 1850s, the Old Dominion's Democracy took an aggressively proslavery stance and aligned with Deep South militants as North-South sectional tensions heightened. The Chivalry effectively dominated the state party after 1844 and soon placed two

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<sup>44</sup> Crofts, *Old Southampton*, pp. 131–40; Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 93, 97–101, 109–113.

<sup>45</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 189–90 (quotations); Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York, 1990), pp. 28–29, 237–48; Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York and Oxford, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 120, 139–42, 144, 148, 189–90 (quotation); Crofts, *Old Southampton*, pp. 137–40, 186–92.



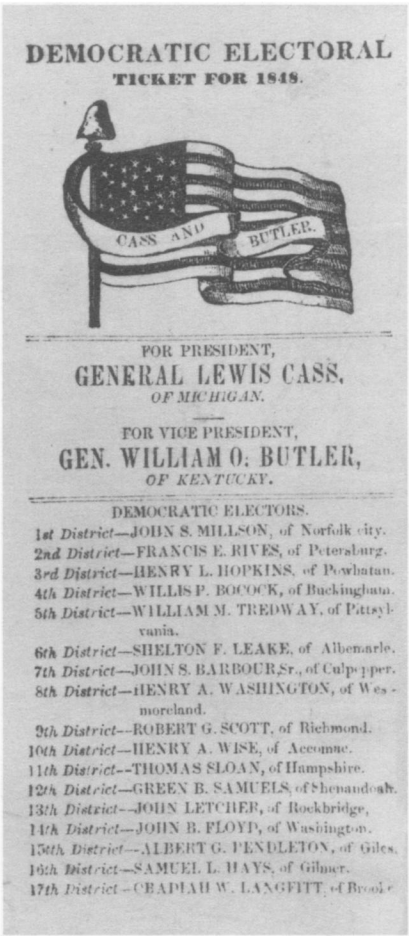
prominent states' rights particularists, Robert M. T. Hunter and James Murray Mason, in the United States Senate. They and most of Virginia's many Democratic congressmen stood with John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis. In sharp contrast to their Whig rivals, Virginia Democrats "were among the most proslavery politicians in the country," totally committed to "the defense of slavery and southern rights."<sup>47</sup>

The outlook of Virginia Democrats had deep historical roots. An obsession about states' rights and strict construction ("the Doctrines of '98") had long been nurtured by a circle of conservative intellectuals who embraced and intensified the rural-particularist strain of Jeffersonian thought. John Taylor of Caroline, John Randolph of Roanoke, and their successors thought that innovations of various sorts, especially those related to cities and manufacturing, threatened the Jeffersonian order. By the 1830s and 1840s, the intellectual heirs to Taylor and Randolph reformulated their worries to take new dangers into account. Nathaniel Beverley Tucker and Thomas R. Dew insisted that slavery required no apology. They urged Virginians to rouse from their torpor, spurn the rising northern antislavery movement, and celebrate the virtues of the southern social order. They attempted, with considerable success, to lead the rising generation of Virginians toward a South Carolinian perspective, militantly assertive of southern rights. Their disciples acquired position and influence in the state's Democratic party.<sup>48</sup>

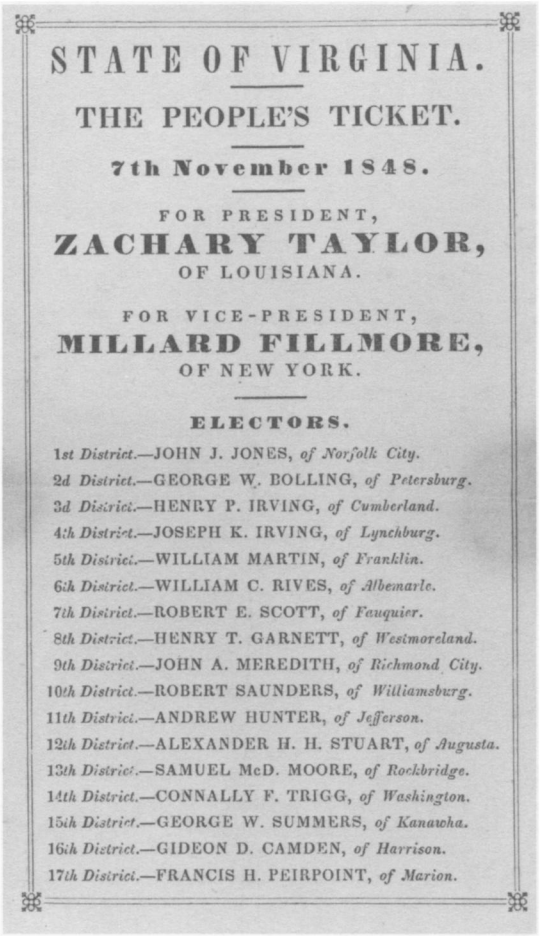
The Whig party was poorly positioned to compete in a proslavery shouting contest. Even eastern Whigs feared the specter of North-South sectional conflict. They complained that Democratic extremism was hurting the South and playing into the hands of antisouthern forces in the North. Furthermore, the "best-known and most vocal" supporters of constitutional reform and gradual emancipation in the late 1820s and early 1830s had become Whigs by the 1840s. A few even continued to insist that Virginia's economic well-being in the long run depended on replacing slave labor with free. Their qualified antislavery stance was broadly consistent with Whig-style economic and moral development—banks, internal improvements,

<sup>47</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 106 (second quotation), 223–24 (first quotation on p. 224), 256–61; Lynwood M. Dent, Jr., "The Virginia Democratic Party, 1824–1847" (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1974), pp. iv–34, 310–56, 399–414. Important sources on Virginia's late antebellum Democratic party also include Craig M. Simpson, *A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia*, The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill and London, 1985); F. N. Boney, *John Letcher of Virginia: The Story of Virginia's Civil War Governor*, Southern Historical Publications, 11 (University, Ala., 1966); and Henry T. Shanks, *The Secession Movement in Virginia, 1847–1861* (Richmond, 1934).

<sup>48</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 225–61; Robert J. Brugger, *Beverley Tucker: Heart over Head in the Old South* (Baltimore, 1978); Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South* (Baltimore and London, 1977). Richard E. Ellis, *The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States' Rights, and the Nullification Crisis* (New York and Oxford, 1987), pp. 194–98, differentiates astutely between traditionalists and proslavery nullifiers.



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Voter turnout declined nationwide in the presidential election of 1848, which pitted nominal Whig Zachary Taylor against Lewis Cass of Michigan. Although Taylor carried the border states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina, Virginia did not support its native son.

manufacturing, education, and temperance. Predictably, Democrats routinely denounced all Whigs as abolitionists.<sup>49</sup>

In the late 1840s, North-South disagreements reached a new level of acrimony. Northern demands to ban slavery from the Mexican cession evoked southern demands to protect the rights of slave owners who might wish to settle there. At the same time, Virginia's east-west tensions once again became acute. Western pressure for free white male suffrage, reapportionment of the legislature, and the popular election of public

<sup>49</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 221–24 (quotation on p. 221); Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, pp. 117, 622–23.



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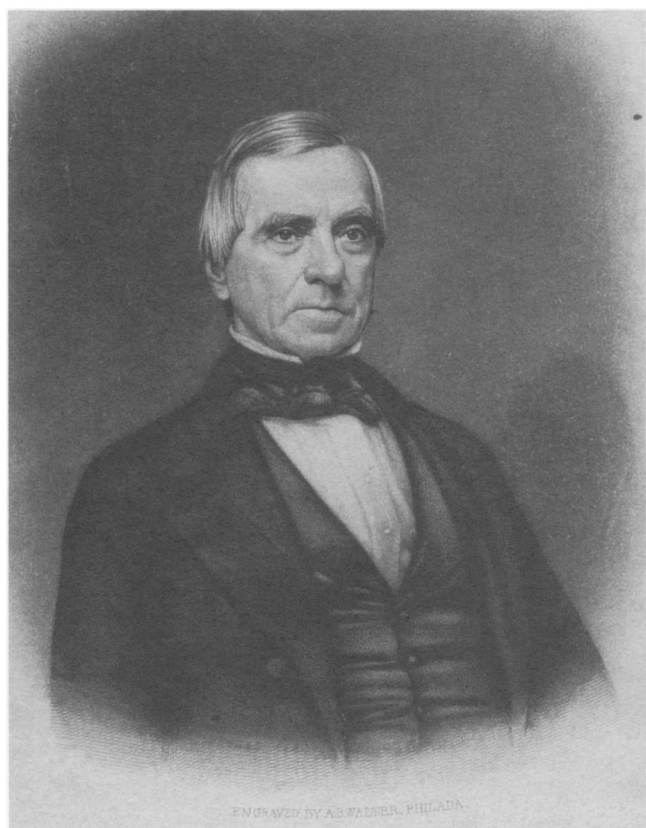
Zachary Taylor hoped to create a party realignment through the force of his personality, just as Andrew Jackson had done. His bid to secure a new coalition, confounded by issues arising from the extension of slavery into the Mexican cession, was aborted by his sudden death on 9 July 1850.

officials resulted in the second state constitutional convention in two decades.

The two Virginia parties responded differently to the national impasse. Most Virginia Democrats sided with John C. Calhoun and insisted on equal rights to take slaves into territories. Most Virginia Whigs, following two prominent party leaders, William Ballard Preston and Alexander H. H. Stuart, who served respectively in the cabinets of Whig presidents Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore, disdained southern ultimatums and sought to defuse the crisis. Virginia Whigs embraced the Compromise of 1850; Virginia Democrats obstructed its enactment or gave it only grudging support. The strength of bitter-enders in the Old Dominion was evidenced when James A. Seddon, Hunter's closest ally in the House of Representatives, led six other Virginia Democrats in refusing to endorse the "finality" of the compromise. Only a dozen other congressmen elsewhere in the South supported this extreme southern rights position.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 256–61; Mark J. Stegmaier, "Zachary Taylor versus the South," *CWH* 33 (1987): 236–38; Mark J. Stegmaier, *Texas, New Mexico, and the Compromise of 1850: Boundary Dispute and Sectional Crisis* (Kent, Ohio, and London, 1996), pp. 163, 279; Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, pp. 437, 557–58, 622; William F. Gordon to Robert M. T.



The constitution of 1851 finally lifted property qualifications for voting and provided for the popular election of the governor. That year, former congressman Joseph Johnson of Harrison County became Virginia's first popularly elected governor and the first to hail from west of the Blue Ridge.

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The struggle for internal democratization within Virginia generally pitted west against east and had more to do with section than with party. Nonetheless, the “traditional view depicting the Democrats as the party of progressive reform and the Whigs as the champions of conservative order” is far off the mark. Democrats were “deeply divided,” while a clear majority of Whigs favored reapportionment and white manhood suffrage. In the end, the convention of 1850–51 crafted a compromise generally favorable to western demands. Several easterners played key roles in resolving the impasse, most notably Henry A. Wise, who insisted that constitutional reform would unite the state to protect slavery.<sup>51</sup>

Between 1851 and 1859 a very prosouthern Democratic party dominated Virginia politics. A nucleus of powerful traditionalists, led by

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Hunter, 2 July 1850, William P. Duval to Robert M. T. Hunter, 13 Aug. 1850, in Charles Henry Ambler, ed., *Correspondence of Robert M. T. Hunter, 1826–1876*, in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1916* (2 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1918), 2:113–15.

<sup>51</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 264–83 (first quotation on p. 264; second quotation on p. 265); Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, pp. 78–86. The best assessment of the 1850–51 convention is Francis P. Gaines, Jr., “The Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1850–1851: A Study in Sectionalism” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1950).



senators Hunter and Mason, acted as if Virginia were part of the Deep South. The party held comfortable majorities in the legislature, thereby enabling Hunter and Mason to continue in the Senate. The United States House delegation was overwhelmingly Democratic throughout the decade, and most of the state's congressmen took a southern rights stance.<sup>52</sup> Democrats were aided by sharpened North-South tensions, briefly contained by the 1850 compromise but then rekindled after 1853 by Kansas-related controversies.

Maintaining the party's grip on the governor's office, which became popularly elected for the first time in 1851, presented Democrats with a formidable challenge. They needed to appeal to western nonslaveholders, many of whom were newly enfranchised. Democrats therefore selected a suitable western candidate, an aging former congressman, Joseph Johnson, and hoped thereby to make proslavery politics palatable to white yeomen. This strategy proved successful, as the reticent Johnson edged western Whig George W. Summers, who had been an eloquent advocate of gradual emancipation during the slavery debate of 1832.<sup>53</sup> In 1855, much to the dismay of the gentlemen who presumed to lead the Democrats, Henry A. Wise won the party nomination and the election. He defeated former Whig Thomas S. Flournoy, candidate of the American party, who disdained the rough-and-tumble of a public campaign and left the field to the irrepressible Wise, who crisscrossed the state and spoke incessantly. Wise was an ambitious lone wolf whom the Chivalry viewed as a rabble-rouser. By giving qualified support to the west at the 1850–51 convention, Wise differentiated himself from other easterners. At heart a conservative, Wise posed as an egalitarian. He feared that stand-pat traditionalism might alienate non-slaveholders and make them recruits for the South's external critics.<sup>54</sup> In 1859 Democratic managers breathed a sigh of relief. They replaced the unpredictable Wise with western moderate John Letcher, who recanted previous emancipationist heresies. Easterner William L. Goggin, candidate of the Opposition party, attempted unsuccessfully to raise doubts about Letcher's proslavery credentials.<sup>55</sup>

Various elements contributed to Virginia's southern tilt during the 1850s and created fertile ground for politicians with a sectional agenda.

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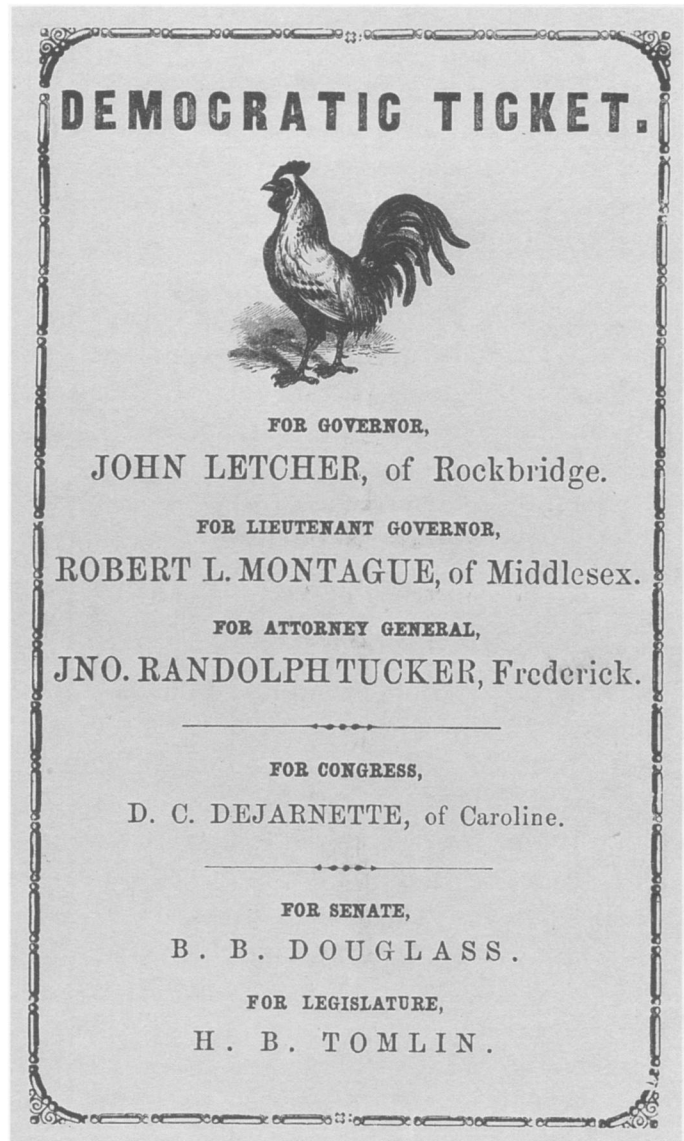
<sup>52</sup> Shanks, *Secession Movement in Virginia*, pp. 48, 51; Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 260–61, 264. In Shade's words, "The party of Jackson had become the party of southern rights" (*ibid.*, p. 264).

<sup>53</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, p. 260; Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, pp. 622–23.

<sup>54</sup> Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, unravels Wise's seeming contradictions. On the 1855 campaign, see Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, pp. 926–29; and John David Bladck, "'Virginia Is Middle Ground': The Know Nothing Party and the Virginia Gubernatorial Election of 1855," *VMHB* 106 (1998): 35–70, esp. 55, 63–64.

<sup>55</sup> Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 58–59; Boney, *Letcher of Virginia*, pp. 74–88.

Democratic congressman John Letcher narrowly defeated Opposition candidate William L. Goggin in the race for the executive mansion in 1859.



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Generations of westward migration created networks of Virginia kinship across the South. The identities of many influential eastern Virginians remained tied to their roles as slaveholders. So, too, one must take into account the run-up of slave prices during the prosperous 1850s, an increase that gave Virginia slaveholders added incentive to defend their property rights. The sale of slaves to southwestern buyers, even if not a topic of polite conversation, became a flourishing and lucrative business.<sup>56</sup> Even the state's

<sup>56</sup> For a succinct recent reminder of the South's huge economic stake in slavery, see James L. Huston, "Property Rights in Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War," *JSH* 65 (1999): 249–86.



Prints Division, New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

Cartoonist M. A. Woolf placed the blame for the sectional crisis on warring politicians. Under the bound and plucked bird, resting on prosthetic legs of anarchy and secession, appears a quotation from *Hamlet*: "I was murdered i' the Capitol."

most potentially modern sector, the urban commercial elite, adopted an increasingly prosouthern outlook. Gregg D. Kimball argues persuasively that the most cosmopolitan citizens of Richmond "consciously became more Southern as they came into contact with Northerners." They welcomed "railroads, steamships, and the other trappings of modernity" yet found themselves at the same time estranged from "the social order created under Northern capitalism."<sup>57</sup> Ordinary urban whites, who tended to see slaves as economic competitors, feared any amelioration of harsh slave discipline. In 1852, when Governor Johnson commuted the death sentence of a Richmond tobacco factory slave who had killed his overseer in self-defense, an indignant mob of working-class whites demonstrated outside the governor's home.<sup>58</sup>

Tarter raises a series of unanswered questions about Virginia's involvement in the interstate slave trade; a modern study of the subject is overdue (Tarter, "The New Virginia Bookshelf," p. 54).

<sup>57</sup> Gregg David Kimball, "Place and Perception: Richmond in Late Antebellum America" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1997), p. 110.

<sup>58</sup> William A. Link, "The Jordan Hatcher Case: Politics and 'A Spirit of Insubordination' in Antebellum Virginia," *JSH* 64 (1998): 615–48.

Virginia's southern rights Democrats worked to coalesce "the most powerful pressure group in the most powerful political party."<sup>59</sup> As James A. Seddon explained to Robert M. T. Hunter in 1852, "we have and can maintain (within certain limits of considerable latitude) ascendancy in the Democratic party of the South and probably controlling influence on the general policy and action of the whole party in the Union." Four years later, just after James Buchanan's election as president, another of Hunter's southern rights loyalists rejoiced that the time had arrived to "crush the enemies of the South" by dictating policy to "Mr. Buchanan and the Northern Democracy." Virginia Democrats congratulated themselves on having made their state uniquely influential within national party councils.<sup>60</sup>

The collapse of the national Whig party and movement into the Republican party by most former Whigs in the free states made it hard for southern non-Democrats to remain competitive. The Whig party went into permanent eclipse in the Deep South between 1850 and 1852. In the Upper South, Whigs persisted under various designations—as Know-Nothings or the American party between 1855 and 1857, and as the Opposition party in 1858 and 1859. But their inability to build statewide majorities kept most leading Virginia Whigs out of public life. Even though the statewide proportion of slaveholders—and their absolute numbers—decreased during the 1850s, the times were ill suited for any effort to escape the southern rights straitjacket. Economic prosperity worked against challenges to the political status quo. So, too, the antforeign character of the Know-Nothing movement cemented the loyalties of German and Irish voters to the Democratic party ever more firmly.<sup>61</sup>

While pandering flagrantly to proslavery ideologues, Democratic leaders nonetheless managed to protect their western flanks. Political and economic leadership in western Virginia tended to be "cumulative and hereditary." The right sort of eastern connections opened the door to acquiring good land and winning appointment to political office. An oligarchy of interconnected families dominated most western Virginia counties. Western political leaders had ample reason to play by the rules: the system had worked to their advantage and made them receptive to

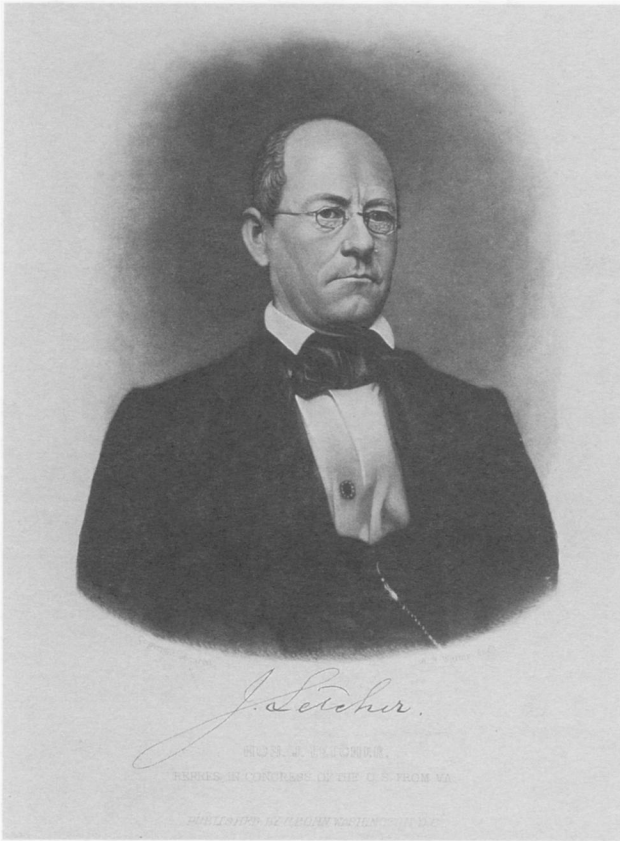
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<sup>59</sup> William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 1: *Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York and Oxford, 1990), p. 520.

<sup>60</sup> James A. Seddon to Robert M. T. Hunter, 7 Feb. 1852, George Booker to Robert M. T. Hunter, 16 Nov. 1856, in Ambler, ed., *Hunter Correspondence*, pp. 136–39, 200–201; Petersburg *Virginia Index*, n.d., in Staunton *Vindicator*, 16 Sept. 1859 (available on-line at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/Browser1/abrowser/rvsept59.html>).

<sup>61</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 283–85; Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 37–65.





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In 1847 John Letcher of Lexington warned that if eastern Virginia did not embrace basic popular reforms, the western part of the state would break off and adopt gradual emancipation. Letcher repudiated his flirtation with emancipation but remained a moderate Unionist through the presidential election of 1860 and the early days of the secession crisis.

continued blandishments from eastern leaders who sought party unity on major issues.<sup>62</sup>

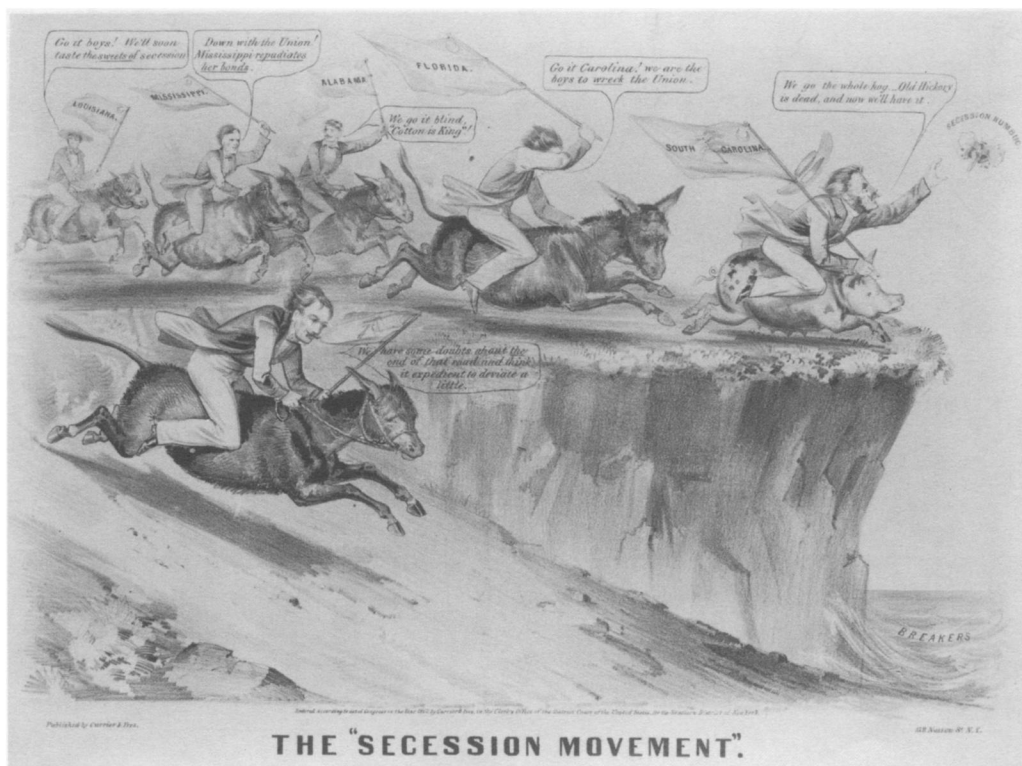
For the most part, western Democrats accepted the compromises agreed upon at the constitutional convention of 1850–51, which tightly limited taxation of slaves and allowed the state Senate to remain in eastern hands. In the judgment of John Alexander Williams, “the last antebellum decade was one of sectional reconciliation in Virginia, not conflict.”<sup>63</sup> Ordinary western nonslaveholders showed few signs of challenging proslavery party leaders or the mantra of southern rights. Elite Virginians insisted on “security for their property rights in human capital, and the mass of whites seemed to concur with them.”<sup>64</sup>

In 1860, however, southern rights Democrats overplayed their hand, both nationally and in Virginia. They split the national party, which resulted

<sup>62</sup> John Alexander Williams, *West Virginia: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1976), pp. 41–47 (quotation on p. 43).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. (quotation on p. 46). Williams suggests that Wheeling and the panhandle region between Pennsylvania and Ohio were far more estranged than most other parts of the northwest (ibid., pp. 49–52).

<sup>64</sup> Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 264 (quotation), 285.



Library of Congress

Currier & Ives likened the Deep South's move toward secession to a mad dash to destruction, as Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida follow South Carolina over a cliff in pursuit of the "secession humbug." Missing from the print are Virginia and the other states of the Upper South, whose interests appeared divergent from those of the Lower South.

in competing Democratic presidential tickets. Although most party regulars in Virginia embraced the southern rights candidacy of John C. Breckinridge, a breakaway faction, led by the state's governor, John Letcher, threw its support to the national Democratic candidate, Stephen A. Douglas. Running well in Letcher's home area in the Shenandoah Valley and cutting heavily into the party base in the northwest, Douglas emerged with almost 10 percent of the vote. The divided Democratic vote enabled John Bell, the former Whig United States senator from Tennessee running on the Constitutional Union party ticket, to gain a narrow plurality victory. Bell thus became the first non-Democrat to carry a Virginia presidential contest.<sup>65</sup>

Party lines held relatively firm in Virginia in 1860, except for the division of the Democratic vote. Three months later, however, Democrats suffered

<sup>65</sup> Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 60, 76–87 (esp. map on p. 83).

a far worse defeat than in the presidential election. Hunter, Mason, and eight of their southern rights allies in the United States House called upon Virginians to act with the Deep South.<sup>66</sup> Parts of “Old Virginia” rallied to the secession banner by margins that exceeded the normal Democratic vote. In some localities in the Tidewater and Piedmont, secession triumphed with near unanimity, a levee en masse that duplicated the process in the Deep South.<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere, however, including almost the entire west, secession spawned a fierce backlash. By ignoring earlier reassurances that a vote for Breckinridge was not a vote for disunion and by clamoring to follow the states of the Deep South, Virginia secessionists wrecked the Democratic party. West of the Blue Ridge secessionists suffered a disastrous five-to-one defeat, as tens of thousands of heretofore loyal party members either rejected secession or refused to vote. Scores of local Democratic leaders in the west forfeited political advantages that they and their families had accumulated over generations. The statewide vote against secession was greater than two to one, and the convention that assembled in Richmond was dominated by well-known national Whigs—George W. Summers, Alexander H. H. Stuart, William Ballard Preston, John Janney, Robert Y. Conrad, and Samuel McDowell Moore. Summers, Preston, and Moore had voted for gradual emancipation in 1832. Union Whigs openly collaborated with Letcher and other Douglas Democrats in 1861 to create a more permanent Union party.<sup>68</sup>

The Whig Unionists who dominated the Virginia convention of 1861 well understood that their state had different economic underpinnings than the cotton states. They had long promoted economic diversification,

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<sup>66</sup> Virginia secessionists hesitated to show their true colors. Hunter called for all slave states to secede, ostensibly as a first step to “reconstructing” the Union. Wise talked about “fighting within the Union” (Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 135–36, 139–40; Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, pp. 236–40, 247; Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, p. 289 [quotation]).

<sup>67</sup> The best indication of secession sentiment was the vote on reference; see Documents of the Convention of 1861, no. 9, in George H. Reese, ed., *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861* . . . (4 vols.; Richmond, 1965), 1:792–96; and Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 139–41. Crofts, *Old Southampton*, pp. 178–92, examines local patterns of secession (and antisecession) strength. The most planter-dominated voting district in Southampton produced a unanimous prosecession vote. King and Queen County, a competitive partisan arena in the 1840s that had become strongly Democratic in the 1850s and thereby exhibited a pattern more characteristic of the Deep South than of Virginia, elected a militant anticompromise secessionist, Richard H. Cox, while voting down reference by a margin of 449 to 44 (*Richmond Enquirer*, 8 Feb. 1861). Christopher John Olsen, “Community, Honor, and Secession in the Deep South: Mississippi’s Political Culture, 1840s–1861” (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1996), offers an imaginative assessment of Deep South secession. Olsen sees the movement as a “popular crusade” that was “driven by forces deep within southern culture,” particularly an aggrieved sense of insulted masculinity (pp. x–xi, 330–31).

<sup>68</sup> Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 130–42. Two leading Union Whigs, Robert Eden Scott and John B. Baldwin, had sided with the east on intrastate issues in 1850–51; they probably would not have been classified as national Whigs before 1860–61. John Minor Botts, probably the most outspoken national Whig in Virginia, ran as an unconditional Unionist and narrowly lost in the multicandidate race for delegate in Richmond.

industrial development, and improved transportation. Aware that Virginia's commercial ties to the North were increasingly substantial, they thought southern independence a recipe for economic disaster. John B. Baldwin noted that Virginia wheat, tobacco, livestock, and garden crops were sold in Baltimore and other cities of the Northeast. Summers explained that salt and coal from northwest Virginia went to customers throughout the Ohio and upper Mississippi valleys. From Wheeling, the leading manufacturing center in the northwest, came warnings that secession would "kill us off . . . more completely than a big fire." Upper South Unionists insisted that they were not hostile to slavery but were unwilling to treat it as a sacred cow. "Slavery is the great ruling interest of the extreme Gulf States," one Unionist observed, but the states of the Upper South had "*great interests besides slavery, which cannot be lightly abandoned.*"<sup>69</sup>

Had Virginia been the master of its own destiny in 1861, the state would no longer have been controlled by the southern rights element that loomed so large in the 1840s and 1850s. The Union coalition in early 1861 was conspicuous for its overwhelming base among nonslaveholders. It was not an antislavery party (its members often argued that the only way to protect slavery was to save the Union). But it had the potential to pull Virginia more decisively in a Whiggish direction than ever before, while cutting the taproot of states' rights particularism that Democrats had used to bind the commonwealth to the Deep South.<sup>70</sup>

As everyone knows, Virginia was not the master of its own destiny in 1861. The collision between the newly formed governments of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis destroyed the middle ground on which Virginia Unionists tried to stand. Lincoln's proclamation for 75,000 troops, which required the states of the Upper South to fight against their southern brothers, created secessionist majorities everywhere in Virginia except the northwest. Most Unionists went with their state rather than go to war on the northern side. Only in the far northwest did unconditional Unionists have a different agenda.<sup>71</sup>

Amid the wreckage, one intriguing might-have-been continues to nag. Historians have rarely recognized the significance of the would-be secessionist coup in Richmond in mid-April 1861. That rash plan had the potential to bring Union and Confederate forces into conflict under circumstances that could have positioned the federal government in Washington as the protector of the elected government of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

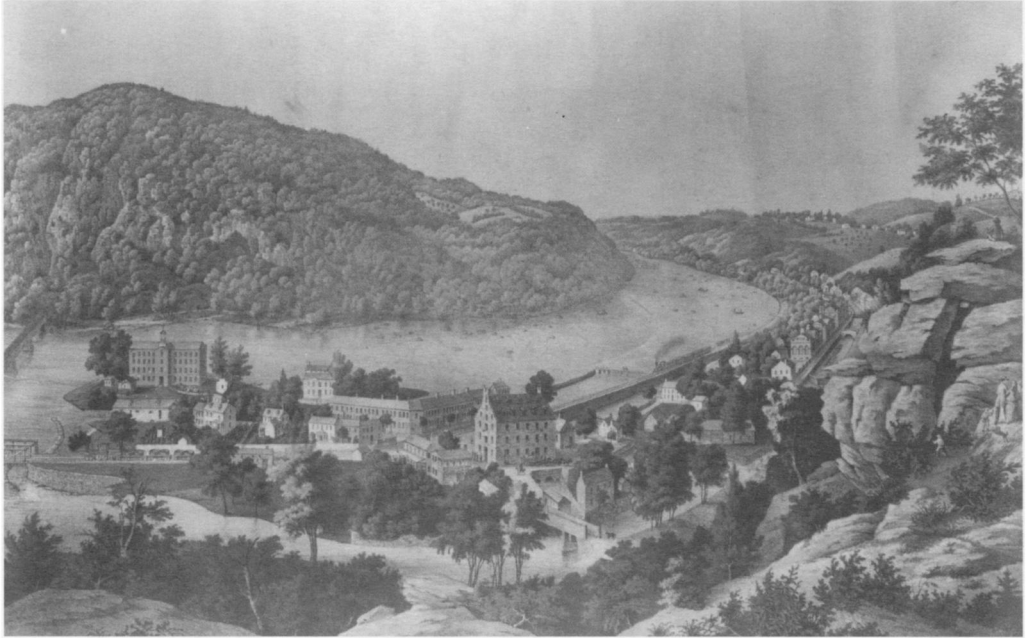
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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 106–7.

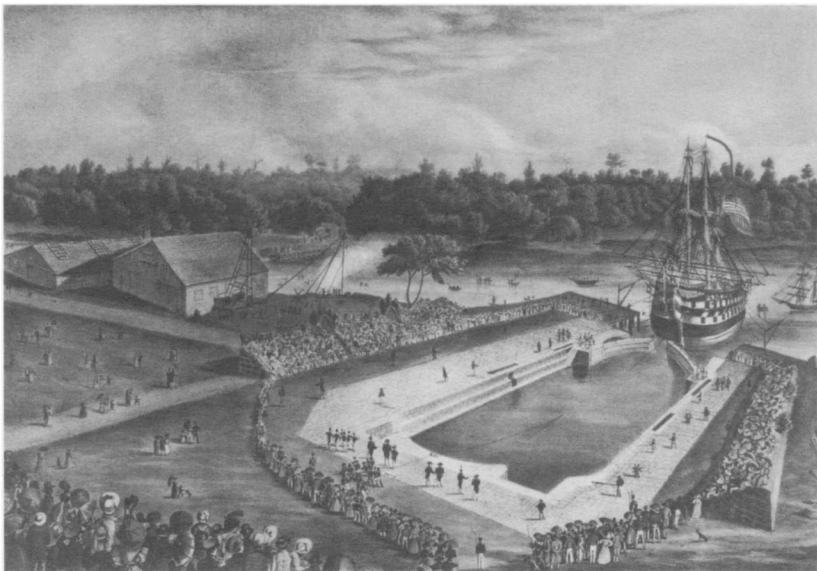
<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159–63, 191–94.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 334–42, 360.



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John Brown's attempt to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry (above) in October 1859 played a pivotal role in mounting sectional tensions by increasing southerners' paranoia about abolitionist conspiracies. The arsenal was a focus of secessionists' attention in April 1861, when an extralegal group ordered volunteers to secure it and the Gosport Navy Yard (below) before Virginia left the Union.

*Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum, Portsmouth, Virginia*

In late March a small nucleus of southern rights zealots sent out a circular calling for like-minded patriots to assemble in Richmond on 16 April. Although the revolutionary nature of the meeting was “carefully concealed,” the organizers plainly expected to use “physical force” to accomplish their purposes. The plan called for Governor Letcher, who had become a firm Unionist, to be “arrested or kidnapped,” while Summers and the Unionist leadership of the convention were to be “seized and imprisoned.” Lieutenant Governor Robert L. Montague, an avowed secessionist, may have been party to the plot. Substantial evidence indicates that Richmond’s slave traders, fearful that the Deep South Confederacy would bar slave imports, bankrolled the conspirators.<sup>72</sup>

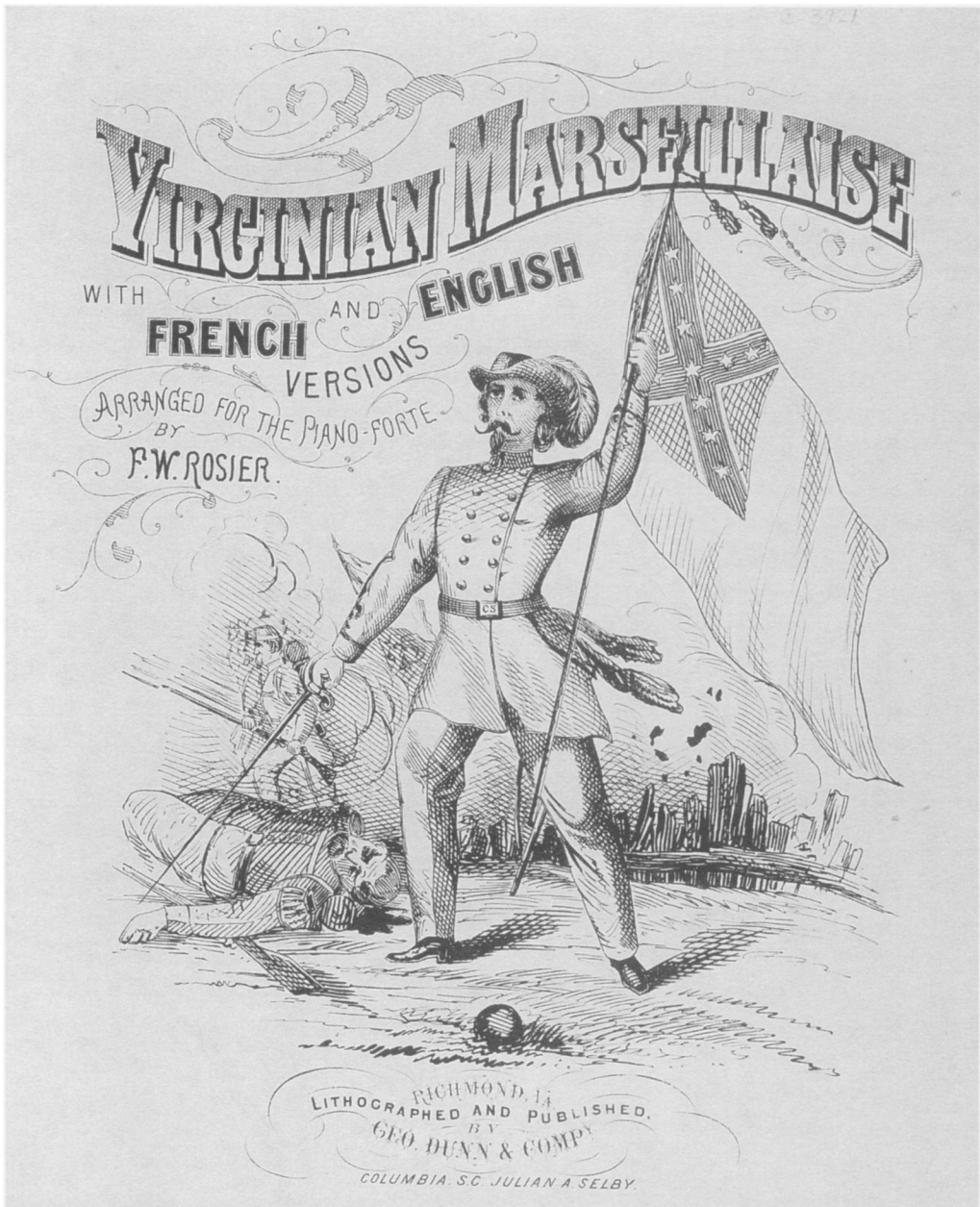
The central figure in the secessionist conspiracy was former governor Henry A. Wise. He suspected that Republican party leaders welcomed the Deep South’s departure from the Union, so long as they could hold the Upper South and retain its iron and coal deposits. Unwilling to see the South divided and the Upper South transformed into a powerless appendage, Wise decided on drastic action. His plan involved the use of irregular militia to seize the major federal military installations in the state—the armory and arsenal at Harpers Ferry and the Gosport Navy Yard near Norfolk, the nation’s largest. On Monday morning, 16 April, the southern rights conspirators convened behind closed doors in Richmond. Their gathering coincided with the electrifying news of Lincoln’s call for 75,000 troops, which in effect demanded that Virginia and the Upper South choose sides in a war. As it became plain that the convention would vote for secession, the conspirators shelved their plans for a coup. They did, however, order volunteer troops to attack Harpers Ferry and Gosport. Wise stood before the convention on 17 April waving a pistol as he announced with “glaring eyes and bated breath” that “blood will be flowing at Harpers Ferry before night.” Soldiers responsive to Wise’s command rather than Governor Letcher’s indeed took Harpers Ferry and Gosport. The readiness of substantial military forces to heed extralegal authority offers the most tangible indication that the southern rights conspiracy was no mere bluff or exercise in political theatrics.<sup>73</sup>

Lincoln, fixated on the perils caused by Deep South secession, judged that the Union could be restored only by force. In so concluding, he was doubtless correct. By introducing force in the manner he did, however, Lincoln annihilated the middle ground then occupied by Virginia and other

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<sup>72</sup> William K. Scarborough, ed., *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, Library of Southern Civilization (3 vols.; Baton Rouge and London, 1972–89), 2:568–71 (7 Feb. 1863); Frederic Bancroft, *Slave-Trading in the Old South* (1931; New York, 1959), pp. 94–119.

<sup>73</sup> Shanks, *Secession Movement in Virginia*, pp. 202–4 (first quotation on p. 203); Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 316–23 (second quotation on p. 321); Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 288–90; Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, pp. 248–51.



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The “*Virginian Marseillaise*” sought to draw parallels between the secessionists of 1861 and the French patriots who rose up against tyranny in 1789.

nonseceding slave states. What Lincoln overlooked, as he concentrated his attention on challenges from Charleston and Montgomery, was that southern rights hotspots in Virginia were about to hand him a precious opportunity. Had they in fact seized Governor Letcher and the Union

leaders of the convention, while appealing for help from the Confederate government, Lincoln might have been able to frame his showdown with the Confederacy in a very different manner and with the huge advantage of having popular majorities in the Upper South supporting the Union side.<sup>74</sup>

A Confederate States of America without Virginia? Unthinkable, of course, even though we now realize that only the crucible of war welded Virginia to the southern side.<sup>75</sup> And yet Virginia's ultimate allegiance may well have been a close call. A refusal to secede would have been more consistent with the Old Dominion's economic and social characteristics, more consistent, too, with its long history of intrastate regional diplomacy through which east-west differences were adjusted sufficiently to keep a sprawling, diverse commonwealth from dividing. When western nonslaveholders finally stood up to southern rights Democrats in 1860–61 and placed a coalition of Whigs and western Democrats in position to control the state, Virginia's political arrangements finally had the potential to correspond to its economic and social ones. By then, however, events had spiraled out of control. Deep South militants, emboldened by long-standing evidence that they had allies in the Upper South, engineered an epic confrontation in which the most bloody theater would be the Old Dominion.

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<sup>74</sup> Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, pp. 322–23, 355.

<sup>75</sup> Edward L. Ayers, "Introduction: The Edge of the South," in Ayers and Willis, eds., *Edge of the South*, pp. 4–5.